

How to Get Good at Dealing With Massive Change

It can be stressful and anxiety-inducing to be in the middle of a bunch of life changes at once — so much so that it can turn a time of change into a time of misery.

We all go through times of massive change: a divorce, death in the family, change of job (or loss of job), moving to a new home or city, turbulence in your relationships, political chaos, and all kinds of uncertainties and demands on your time and attention.

It can be overwhelming and distressing. But what if we could get good at dealing with all kinds of changes? It would open us up in times of change, so that these times can be times of deepening, growth, and even joy.

We can train to get good at dealing with times of massive change.

And here's a secret: **actually, we're always in times of change.**

If you're waiting for things to settle down, it's a beautiful shift to let go of that and just relax into the groundlessness of it all.

"We are always in transition. If you can just relax with that, you'll have no problem."

~ Chogyam Trungpa

So let's talk about training the mind to get good at dealing with change.

How Our Mind Usually Reacts to Change

Imagine if your entire life were upended overnight — a storm came and destroyed your home and your job, and you couldn't find everyone you know and love. You don't have any possessions, no way to communicate.

How would your mind react? It would react out of habitual patterns that have been formed since childhood.

Some common ways of reacting to massive change like this:

- Your mind complains — it doesn't like change that it didn't choose. Your mind will have a narrative that asks "why me?" and/or gets angry. It's unhappy about the changes.
- Your mind gets angry at others — it blames and might lash out at them. Your mind asks, "Why do they have to be like that??" And this creates distance between you and them.
- Your mind looks for comfort — a return to what you're used to, what you know, what you've always gone to for comfort. If you became homeless, you might drink a soda or eat French fries or something, just to comfort yourself. In fact, we comfort ourselves all the time as a way to deal with stress and change: eating junk food, shopping, TV or Youtube, getting on your phone, social media, porn, etc.
- Your mind tries to get control. This isn't always a bad thing (making a list can be helpful, for example), but constantly striving for control isn't helpful. In fact, it can be stressful, trying to control the massively uncontrollable.
- There are helpful ways of coping as well — talking to someone, exercising, meditating, drinking some tea, taking a bath, etc. These are usually habits that people create to cope in a healthier way. However, in the example I've given (a storm making you homeless), and lots of other situations, these options might not be available.

What we're going to train in is a different way of dealing with change, that will help us in any situation, and reduce stress, open our minds to chaotic experiences, and help us find joy and gratitude in the midst of turbulence.

How to Shift the Mind

So other than talking about it and taking a bath, what can we do to shift the way we deal with change?

It starts with the idea that disliking change, stress about change, and resistance to change are all in our minds. Everything that's stressful and sucky about any change, or a great amount of change, is in our minds.

The good news about that is that if it's in our minds, we can work with it. We can let go of things, shift things, open up to things ... because our minds are adaptable and trainable.

The bad news is that we often don't see the things our mind does that causes our difficulties, and so we blame external circumstances. But with this training, we'll learn to see it.

So here's how we can shift how we respond to change and stress:

1. **Notice when you're feeling stress or resistance about change.** Usually you'll be doing one of the reactions mentioned in the previous section, so it'll become easy to tell with a bit of practice. Going to your favorite social media or news site? You might be resisting something.
2. **Drop into the pure experience of the moment.** You're stressing and resisting because of your thoughts about your situation (or others). The thoughts are the cause of your suffering, not the situation. The situation just exists, it is not bad. So instead of continuing to be caught up in your thoughts, drop into the pure experience of the present moment. To do this, shift your awareness to what's happening in your body right now. What sensations are there? What does the sensation of stress or awareness feel like, in your body? Don't judge or get caught up in a narrative about the stress, just notice. Notice the sensations of your surroundings as well — what sounds can you hear? Notice the light, colors, shapes, textures. The feeling of air on your skin, or clothes on your body. When your mind gets caught up in thought, just return to the sensation of something happening right now.
3. **Open to the wide-open nature of this moment, of reality.** You're in the present

moment ... now notice how wide this moment is. It's boundless, not just the narrow world of your thoughts about your life (thoughts that confine you to a small space), but actually boundless in all directions. You can label each thing you notice (chair, table, myself, dog, tree) or you can notice that actually, it's all just one big field of energy. One big ocean of sensation, an ocean of matter and movement, with no separation between any of it. Noticing this wide-open nature of reality, not bound by labels, ideas or thoughts ... we can let our minds open as vast as the sky. Don't worry if this part is difficult at first, it's something you can train in (which we'll talk about in a minute).

4. **Relax into the beauty of the changing moment.** From this wide-open place, we can relax our resistant mind, and just relax into the everchanging moment. Notice the beauty of this change — everything is moving, changing, shifting into a new moment. Nothing stays the same, and nothing is really solid. It's flux, it's flow, it's the swirling ocean current of the universe. This is incredibly beautiful, if we can relax and enjoy it.
5. **Practice compassion, gratitude and joyful appreciation.** From this relaxed place, we can start to practice three things. First, see if you can find compassion for yourself and others, for the suffering and struggle you're going through. Send out a loving wish to all beings, that they find peace. Second, practice gratitude — can you be grateful for this moment? Can you be grateful for the change? For me, even with a jolting change like the death of my father or one of my best friends, along with the pain of loss, I could also feel gratitude that I had them in my life, which was an incredible gift. This doesn't mean you have to ignore the pain and stress — it just means noticing that both pain *and* gratitude can co-exist in the same moment. Third, can you appreciate this moment for what it is? Appreciate its beauty, its swirling change, its wide openness, its heartbreaking gorgeousness. I often find joy in this appreciation for the universe as it is.
6. **Practice loving things exactly as they are.** And along those lines, take a moment to love the everchanging moment exactly as it is. It includes suffering, wounded beings lashing out at others, loss and pain, but also constant shifting, constant growth and degradation, constant moving into something new. You are one with the wholeness of the universe, co-creating it with all other beings and matter and energy, and it is something to be loved fiercely.

This is the process I suggest you try.

What happens here is that we open up to change instead of resisting it. We learn to love things as they are, including the change, rather than complaining about them. We learn to find appreciation and joy in the change, rather than wishing things wouldn't change and being attached to our comfortable ways.

Of course, we can't go through the whole process all the time, but it's worth going through step by step a few times, maybe one or two dozen times, until you feel like you have a physical understanding of it. With daily training, I can guarantee that something will shift in

you.

Daily Training is the Key

Going through the steps above once or twice will help you learn it, but it won't really matter on a day-to-day basis in your life until you train in it.

Daily training is the best method.

Here's the training plan I recommend:

1. **Sit for 5 minutes in the morning.** Feel free to start with just 2 minutes, and work your way to 5. When 5 minutes is too short, extend to 10. Practice the steps above. Don't let yourself move for those 5 minutes — sit still and practice.
2. **Practice during the day.** After a week, in addition to the morning training, try to notice when you are stressed or resisting change. When that happens, think of it as a mindfulness bell that is calling on you to practice. Pause, if you can, and practice, even for a few moments. You don't have to go through the whole process, just the parts that you have time for, that are most helpful to you in the moment. Journal how these two trainings go, and share with someone else.
3. **Intermediate: Give yourself some discomfort training.** After you do the first two trainings for at least a month (and two months is even better), set aside 5-10 minutes each day for discomfort training. For example, difficult exercise or a cold shower, or a writing session every morning. This session is supposed to be more than mildly uncomfortable, but not crazy uncomfortable. Somewhere in the middle. As you put yourself in this discomfort, practice the steps above. It's more challenging than morning meditation, but doable.
4. **Advanced: Do a weeklong meditation retreat, or a week of purposeful change.** After you practice for 6 months to a year, go on a weeklong meditation retreat. It will deepen your practice. Or go through a week of drastic change, that you put yourself into on purpose. For example, purposely travel around the world with very little (less than 8 lbs. in a small backpack), or go on a weeklong hike using the ultralight approach. The point of this kind of training is to give yourself an extended period of practicing with the method above. Not to see how tough you are, or anything like that. Note: It's possible life will give you an unexpected month or more of incredible change — losing a loved one while changing jobs, or getting an illness while dealing with financial problems. If that happens, think of it as a gift of advanced training.

That's the training. I recommend just the first two steps for most people — I think it'll make a world of difference. The next two steps are if you want to master the method, which isn't necessary to see some benefits.

This is a form of self care. In addition, other forms of self care are also recommended: going for a walk, exercise, taking a bath, doing yoga, eating well, getting sleep, having a support network to talk things out with, getting out in nature, creating space for solitude and silence. These are all important.

If you go deep into this practice, you'll see some profound shifts. I know I have.

"If we're willing to give up hope that insecurity and pain can be eliminated, then we can have the courage to relax with the groundlessness of our situation. This is the first step on the path."

~Pema Chodron

Train with Me

Would you like to train in shifting in the middle of change, uncertainty and discomfort?

Join my Fearless Training Program, where we're training our minds to shift into openness in the uncertainty of meaningful work.